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AUTHOR Herron, Edna; Buss, Jean R.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Project ACCESS, in which a state education agency, a university, and a rural school district collaborated to provide support and technical assistance for educators working with autistic students. Teachers attended preservice and inservice programs to receive training in working with autistic students. During the 1989-1990 school year, over 400 persons attended 8 workshops. Topics included assessment, communication, behavioral programming, social and leisure skills, integration with nonhandicapped peers, and community-based programming. Continuing education units were granted for all workshops and academic credit could be earned for most workshops of 2 days or longer. Preservice and inservice teachers could earn additional academic credit through weekend and intersession courses. A resource library afforded teachers the opportunity to borrow resource materials and evaluation instruments related to autism. The project staff determined whether a child was eligible for on-site consultation services by reviewing the referral documentation. Once eligibility was determined, an area consultant observed the child in several settings and made written recommendations for services. Project staff were occasionally asked to provide consultation services regarding general programs for students with autism. Approximately 93 percent of staff receiving consultation services during the 1988-1989 school year reported full or partial resolution of their concerns. In addition, workshop participants reported increased feelings of competency in serving students with autism. (LP)

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Presenter: Edna Herron
Co-Presenter: Jean R. Buss
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Project ACCESS: Providing Support and Technical Assistance to Rural Schools Serving Students with Autism

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Edna Herron, Ph.D.
Project ACCESS - SMSU
901 South National
Springfield, MO. 65804

Jean R. Buss, M.Ed.
Section of Special Education
Department of Elementary & Secondary Education
P.O. Box 480
Jefferson City, MO. 65102

Project ACCESS
Providing Support and Technical Assistance to Rural Schools Serving Students with Autism

INTRODUCTION

Serving students with low-incidence handicapping conditions is often a challenge to educators in rural areas. This is complicated by the fact that students with many low-incidence conditions also require extremely specialized services. Teachers and related service personnel may require specialized training and staffing patterns may need to be different than they are for less unusual conditions.

Autism is just such a condition. Estimates of incidence range from 5 to 20 per 10,00 live births so many rural school districts might go many years without having a student with autism in their midst. When one does appear, however, parents, teachers, and administrators are frequently at loss to determine how these students might be best served. Students who experience autism display communication, sensory, and consequent behavior problems that are frequently challenging to families and educators alike.

In more populous areas there may be debate as to whether or not students with autism ought to be educated in homogenous groups. Generally the argument for homogenous grouping goes that working with students with autism takes such unique skills and specialized training that only a few teachers can be so trained. The proponents for this position further argue that the related services need by this population are so great that the students must be grouped together so that these services will be more readily available to them. Although it is seldom mentioned privately, the position is seldom put forward publicly that these students are just too disturbing to be integrated into the regular school population. Another group of educators argue that these students with their pronounced social and communication deficits

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can only be adequately educated in heterogeneous groups alongside their non-handicapped peers. Their position is that these students are not only entitled to education within regular classrooms but that they benefit greatly from full inclusion in programs with persons without disabilities. They maintain that isolation from the mainstream of school and society only limits interaction and thus encourages social withdrawal.

In areas that are remote from high concentrations of population the entire argument becomes moot. If there is only one student with autism residing within a 50 mile radius (as there are in several rural Missouri communities) discussions of homogenous versus heterogeneous groupings become irrelevant. The most important question becomes how to deliver services to the student in his home community.

Missouri has three urban centers and a large rural population. In order to provide support and technical assistance to schools serving students who experience autism a mechanism had to be developed for service delivery in the rural areas. A unique collaboration between the state education agency, a large regional state university, and local school districts has resulted in the development of a program that provides training and consultation for educators faced with the challenge of working with students who experience autism. In 1985 the Section of Special Education of the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), responded to the concerns of a number of parents in southwest Missouri by establishing a support service for educators. First located in a rural special education cooperative but moved in 1986 to Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU), Project ACCESS provides on-site consultation, pre-service and in-service training, and a resource lending library. Project ACCESS is supported by a direct grant from DESE to SMSU. The funds for this grant come from Part B of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), which allows states, at their discretion, to fund innovative statewide and regional services or developmental activities. In addition to Project ACCESS, the Missouri Section of Special Education uses this discretionary money to fund a Special Education Dissemination Center, a Special Education Technology Center, Missouri LINC (a center for vocational special education), and a variety of smaller regional and local programs.

The grant funds support an Associate Director/Autism Program Specialist, two Autism Resource Specialists, a Graduate Student Assistant, and a Secretary. The grant provides general operating expenses with the University providing space for project offices, business services, a 1/8 time administrator, and a part time student worker. The grant provides funds to pay part-time area consultants (see Consultation Services below).

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF ACCESS ACTIVITIES

In-Service and Pre-Service Activities

Missouri does not have a teaching credential for teachers of students with autism. These students may be taught by any certificated teacher qualified to provide the services described in the IEP. School districts in Missouri are serving students with autism in a variety of educational settings including regular classrooms and classrooms for mentally retarded, learning disabled, multihandicapped, and behavior disordered students. Many of the lowest functioning students with autism are served the Missouri State Schools for the Severely Handicapped, where are located in a number of cities and towns around the state. Districts are strongly urged by DESE to seek additional training for their teachers who serve students with autism. One of the ways this training can be obtained is by attending one or more workshops presented by Project ACCESS.

Five or more workshops per year are offered in various regions of the state. The workshops are offered on a regional basis to give as many persons as possible the opportunity to attend. These workshops vary in length from one to five days. Topics include but are not limited to assessment, communication, behavioral programming, social and leisure skills, integration with non-handicapped peers, and community based programming. All training is based on principles of providing age-appropriate, functional, community referenced programming for students regardless of age and/or degree of handicap. These workshops are designed for educators, although parents and personnel from other agencies may attend if they wish. The workshops are offered on a cost recovery basis, with fees ranging from $40 to $125.

Continuing Education Units (CEUs) are available for all workshops. Academic credit can be earned for most workshops of two days or longer. Additional activities are required for academic credit, as well as payment of regular University fees. Pre-service and in-service teachers can earn additional academic credit through weekend and intersession courses on autism offered cooperatively by Project ACCESS and SMSU.

During the 1989-90 school year 8 workshops were held which were attended by over 400 persons. 50 students earned academic credit in 5 classes of which workshops formed the core content. An additional 17 students earned one hour of academic credit at a special summer weekend course offered by Project ACCESS and the SMSU Office of Continuing Education. Topics of the workshops included "Working with Autistic Students in the Schools," Evaluating Students with Autism for School Placement and Programming," Working with Children with Autism in the Preschool and Primary Grades," "Integrated Classroom Programming for Students with Au-

tism and Related Communication and Behavior Problems," "The Autism Specialist as a Consultant."

Lending Library

A resource library of almost 500 volumes is maintained at the ACCESS offices from which materials and evaluation instruments may be borrowed. Materials related to autism and some other low incidence, severely handicapping conditions are offered. A Materials List is revised yearly to allow borrowers the most up-to-date reference list. Those wishing to utilize the library service may do so by visiting the library or by calling or writing the project office. Up to three items may be borrowed at a time. Items may be kept for up to two weeks. The Library is managed by one of the Autism Resource Specialists and is staffed by a graduate student assistant and a work/study students. During the 1989-90 school year hundreds of individuals from 62 local education agencies borrowed 500 materials packets from the library. Staff members collected and distributed over 300 individualized information packets about autism.

Consultation Services

Child-Specific Consultation: Requests for on-site consultation regarding a specific child must come from the public school administrators. Upon request referral documents including a school background data form, a parent questionnaire, and two autism checklists are sent to the school. School districts are also requested to send, if possible, a one hour video tape recording of the child in a variety of settings. Although helpful in decision making the video tape is not required to complete the referral. When all referral documents are complete and returned to ACCESS as staff member reviews the information. That staff member then makes a clinical judgement and recommends what kind of services appear to be needed. If necessary, a full staffing is held to determine whether or not this child appears to display enough autistic characteristics to warrant an on-site consultation. A previous diagnosis of autism is not necessary to obtain ACCESS consultation, however, a previous diagnosis of autism or pervasive developmental disorder is usually considered sufficient to place the child on the ACCESS caseload. More importantly, the clinical descriptions that emerge from the parent questionnaire, the school background data form, the checklists, and the videotape must point to autism as a possible, if not likely, diagnosis.

Once it is determined that a child qualifies for ACCESS services a case manager is assigned by the Autism Program Specialist. If the school district is located in the southwestern quadrant of Missouri the case manager is usually one of staff Autism Resource Specialists. Otherwise, the case manager is most often the Program Specialist who then arranges for a consultation by a specially trained ACCESS Area Consultant from the geographical area

near the school (See Area **Consultants** below). The school is then contacted to set up an appointment for the Area Consultant or Resource Specialist to visit the school.

Missouri is a state that requires documentation of the existence and nature of a specific handicapping condition before a student can receive special education and/or related services. Consequently, if a child is determined to be autistic the diagnostic summary must so state. The Missouri State Compliance Plan outlines a specific definition of autism (patterned after that of the Autism Society of America) and a specific set of criteria are delineated for initial eligibility for services. The State Plan also specifies that the school's multidisciplinary team is qualified to make the diagnosis of autism, but that input from a person with experience and expertise in autism is required. ACCESS consultants are frequently asked to provide that input.

Area Consultants: Area consultants are chosen from specialists from institutions of higher education, private agencies,, and local public school districts around the state. Initially, all ACCESS consultants were university faculty members with expertise in autism, behavior management, and/or communication disorders. Occasionally, staff members from private agencies serving students with autism were used as consultants. More recently, however, the Program Specialist or Resource Specialists have visited a public school classroom and noted a teacher who was particularly effective in working with one or more students with autism. That teacher was ten asked to take ACCESS training and to become a consultant for ACCESS. In all cases, the teacher's district administrator is contacted and permission is requested for the teacher to have released time to consult. Although consent is sought from administrators, all formal agreements are made directly with the consultant and payment is made directly to her or him. Few, if any, area consultants work for ACCESS more than 5 days per school year. School districts vary as to what arrangements are made for the teacher/consultant's class during her/his absence, who pays for the substitute, and whether the teacher/consultant is granted a day of leave or has pay docked.

Training for new ACCESS Area Consultants consists of (1) attending at least one 5-day training workshop on "Working with Autistic Students in the Schools," conducted by ACCESS, (2) accompanying an ACCESS Resource Specialist or Program Specialist on at least one on-site consultation visit, and (3) attending a weekend workshop for consultants.

The content of the weekend workshop includes an overview of ACCESS policies and procedures, review of a student with autism, viewing of videotapes of the child at school and home, and participating in a mock staffing on the child. Specific training is also given on interpreting the Missouri State Compliance Plan as

it related to students with autism. Information is shared regarding collaborative consultation techniques and procedures.

The Consultant Visit: When an ACCESS consultant or staff member (hereinafter, both will be referred to as "consultant," and in the feminine) visits a school and a child for the first time, the basic procedure is to observe the student in his usual classroom placement for about two hours. The consultant will usually try to accompany the child to lunch, to the playground, and to any other activities or classes in which he/she is placed to gain information about the child's performance and interactions in a variety of school settings. The consultant then spends some time discussing the program currently in place for the child with the classroom teacher who has primary responsibility for him/her. The special education administrator or principal (often the same person in rural Missouri) is asked in advance to arrange for another person to be responsible for the teacher's class after this period of observation so that she/he will be free to talk with the consultant. After this discussion with the classroom teacher the special education administrator, principal, and others who work with the child are invited to join in to discuss programming for the child and how ACCESS can best assist with this. The local school staff, with assistance from the consultant, develops whatever plans are appropriate for further evaluation and programming. The consultant rarely does actual evaluation beyond informal observation although the consultant often assists the local district in selecting appropriate evaluation instruments and procedures. Return visits are almost always programmatic in nature.

When an ACCESS consultant visits a school district she leaves the teacher a set of handwritten summary notes delineating observations and recommendations for programming. These notes are made in triplicate,with one copy being kept by the consultant and one being maintained in the ACCESS files. Formal reports are prepared by ACCESS staff only upon specific requests by the school district, although Area Consultants are asked to submit formal reports as well as the summary notes.

Further on-site consultation visits are usually arranged at the time of the first visit. At each successive visit, handwritten notes of the observation and programming suggestions are left with the staff. Intermittent telephone consultations are used to discuss particular events or strategies. The consultant keeps contact notes of each telephone consultation and these are filed to maintain continuity of service.

Beyond initial diagnosis consultation usually focuses on programming. ACCESS consultants do not advocate the use of specific curricula for students with autism. It is the ACCESS position that the best education programs are developed through a thorough analysis of behavior and an analysis of the present and future environments in which the individual with autism is expected to

function. All program recommendations are grounded in the following principles:

(1) All activities and materials should be functional and community-referenced.

(2) All activities and materials should be age-appropriate.

(3) Persons with autism function best in clearly structured situations.

(4) Flexibility must be built into educational programs for students with autism.

(5) Behavior must be analyzed to determine its communicative intents and functions.

(6) Increasingly conventional communicative means must be taught to express an increasingly wide range of intents.

(7) Data must be collected and sound behavior management principles consistently applied.

(8) Students with autism should be integrated with their non-handicapped age peers the maximum extent appropriate for the individual child.

(9) Parents must be involved as primary decision makers in the child's educational program.

There is no consultation fee charged to the local school districts. The grant pays the salaries of the staff consultants and a per diem honorarium to the Area Consultants. The school district does pay the expenses of the consultant, usually limited to mileage and meals.

During the 1990-91 School year ACCESS provides 110 on-site consultant visits to 136 children in 91 school districts. Staff and consultants worked with 330 staff members and 104 parents as well as 60 staff persons from non-school agencies. Staff made 370 telephone consultations.

Program Consultation: Occasionally ACCESS is asked by a larger school district to provide consultation regarding the general program for students with autism. This can be provided on a short term, intensive basis or on an ongoing basis. During the 1990-91 school year ACCESS staff has provided one intense, short term evaluation of a program for students with autism in which the Program Specialist and Resource Specialists spent three days in the district observing in classrooms and interviewing teacher, related service providers, and administrators. An evaluation report was prepared and submitted to the administration. To months later the Program Specialist spent three days in the district assisting in the development of a revised program plan. Another district in south central Missouri expressed interest in developing an exemplary program for their students with autism and sought program consultation from Project ACCESS. During the 1990-91 school year one Resource Specialist has visited the district twice each month, provided extensive telephone consultation, in-service training for local district staff, and special education staff members have attended three ACCESS training workshops. There is not fee charged

to the district for these consultations although the local district pays the expenses of the consultants.

SUMMARY

This paper has described a project in which a state department of elementary and secondary education using 94-142 Part B discretionary fund collaborates with a state university and local education agencies to provide support and technical assistance to school districts serving students with autism. Utilizing a staff of three professionals, a graduate assistant, a secretary, and a cadre of part-time area consultants, the project provides a resource lending library, in-service and pre-service training, and on-site consultation. Program activity evaluations completed by LEA personnel receiving ACCESS consultation services indicate that many needs are being met. Upon completion of ACCESS workshops, the participants express feelings of being increasingly competent to serve their students with autism. After a series of consultation visits, both teachers and administrators indicate positive to highly positive overall reactions to the experience. Almost 93% of those receiving consultation during the 1988-89 school year reported full or partial resolution of the concern that precipitated the need for consultation. These data would seem to support the notion that this service delivery model is an appropriate one for a large state having both major metropolitan areas and a widely spaced rural population.

Herron, E., Doelling, J., & Hawkins, S. (1989). Project ACCESS: a statewide project for serving students with autism. Focus on Autistic Behavior. 3:6:1-16.